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Cédric Courtois

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/699>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.699

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Electronic reference

Cédric Courtois, ““Revolutionary Politics” and Poetics in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman*: The Coming-of-Age of the Individual and the Nation in Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015)”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 42.1 | 2019, Online since 20 December 2019, connection on 22 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/699> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.699>

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“Revolutionary Politics” and Poetics in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman*: The Coming-of-Age of the Individual and the Nation in Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015)

Cédric Courtois

- 1 *The Fishermen* recounts the coming of age of four middle-class brothers, aged 9 to 15, who, despite their parents’ warnings to deter them from doing so, become the eponymous fishermen in the “Omi-Ala River.” The novel begins at the heart of “the biting economy of 1990s Nigeria” (Obioma 2015, 31). Fishing represents a fascinating adventure for the four brothers and their friends, as explained by Benjamin, the narrator: “Ikenna’s classmate, Solomon, had told him about the pleasures of fishing. Ikenna described how Solomon had called the sport a thrilling experience that was also rewarding since he could sell some of the fish and earn a bit of income” (17). Their so-called mischief lasts for six weeks until a neighbour spots them as they go about their business on the river banks, and reports their wrongdoing to their mother, triggering her wrath as well as their father’s.¹
- 2 A rudimentary paratextual map of Akure in South-West Nigeria (Yorubaland) has been inserted in the book before the incipit; Akure is the town where the protagonist and narrator, nine-year-old Benjamin at the beginning of the story, was born and raised. It is probably meant to have been drawn by the central character, Benjamin himself, as a child, and it is remarkable to notice that not only does the “Omi-Ala River” occupy a central position on this map, but it also does so in the diegesis *per se*: a whole chapter (the second one, entitled “The River”) is indeed devoted to “Omi-Ala.” This coming-of-age story of Benjamin and his three elder brothers focuses a great deal on the dangerous quality of this river, on whose banks they meet Abulu, the local madman, who is said to have the power of prophecy, and according to whom the eldest brother,

Ikenna, is going to be killed by one of his siblings. From then on, the unity of the family is shattered as Ikenna will be on the lookout for any sign as to who could assassinate him.

- 3 If one follows the classic template of a passage from innocence to experience that corresponds to the classic (teleological) trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*, and if one of the earliest definitions of the genre – Karl Morgenstern's – is considered, it is clear that the characteristics of *The Fishermen* correspond to those of the *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, Morgenstern writes: "[This genre] will justly bear the name *Bildungsroman* firstly and primarily on account of its thematic material, because it portrays the *Bildung* of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness [...]" (quoted in Swales 1978, 12).² *The Fishermen* is a first-person narrative with a strong emphasis on the history of Nigeria, and in particular on the revolutionary transition from military rule to democracy in 1993, which eventually failed. June 12, 1993, is still perceived as a pivotal date in Nigerian history as Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton argue in *A History of Nigeria*: "the presidential election in which Bashir Tofa and M.K.O. Abiola took part, on June 12, 1993, is widely considered to have been the freest, fairest, and most peaceful election in Nigerian history to date" (2012, 227). According to Obioma himself, that particular day was and is still perceived as a revolution for the Nigerian people, i.e. a "dramatic and wide-reaching change in conditions, attitudes, etc.," as shown in his June 7, 2018, Facebook post where he states:

Nigeria's president President [sic] has finally done one thing I think is truly worthy of praise. Although we have no way of knowing how he would have fared, but back in 1993, M.K.O Abiola ran one of the most persuasive campaigns ever, and had a very strong agenda for Nigeria. His campaign was free of the kind of divisive rhetoric you find during elections even in places like the US. He should be rightly honoured. The man's life was part of the inspiration for my novel, THE FISHERMEN.

Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola had a key role in this attempt to institute democracy in the country. The decision made by the current President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, to which Obioma refers in his Facebook post, consists in making June 12 "Democracy Day" in Nigeria, instead of May 29 which was until summer 2019 set aside to commemorate the restoration of democracy in the Federal Republic of Nigeria when Olusegun Obasanjo became president on May 29, 1999. Obioma seems particularly concerned by this date as is made explicit in the novel itself, through the admiration for the figure of M.K.O. Abiola that the four brothers display.

- 4 Despite being a *Bildungsroman*, a genre often viewed as conservative in its traditional form, to what extent can *The Fishermen* be said to (paradoxically) put forth "revolutionary politics" and a poetics of revolution?³ It will first of all be relevant to focus on the development of Benjamin as an individual. The stress will then be laid on the *Bildungsroman* as an allegorical genre which not only focuses on the development of the individual but also on that of the nation. In *The Fishermen*, the June 12th 1993 Revolution, which shook Nigerian society, looms large, and this very revolution leads to excess and (generic) instability, especially because madness seems to affect some of the characters.

Rewriting the *Bildungsroman* Genre? The Revolutionary Development of an Individual

- 5 The *Bildungsroman*, whose archetypal model is considered to be Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1795-96), postulates a linear progression toward experience, knowledge and social (re)integration (the passage from innocence to experience has also been identified as one of the key factors of the *Bildungsroman* by Susan Suleiman in *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* [1983, 65]).⁴ In "Struggling with the African *Bildungsroman*," Ralph A. Austen writes: "Perhaps the only point of consensus in considering whether any narrative can be considered a bildungsroman is that it should deal with an individual's life, focusing on his or her formative youth in the context of a 'modernizing' world" (2015, 215).
- 6 In his *Guardian* review of *The Fishermen*, Helon Habila writes that the novel is "a *Bildungsroman*." Following the tradition of this genre the adult narrator (Benjamin) looks back, with irony and hindsight, to the events leading to the tragedy that befell his family, that is to say the killing of his brother Ikenna by his brother Boja. Benjamin, now an adult, uses the narrative present to remember past events:

When I look back today, as I find myself doing more often now that I have sons of my own, I realize that it was during one of these trips to the river that our lives and our world changed. For it was here that time began to matter, at that river where we became fishermen. (Obioma 2015, 20)

A double perspective is therefore at stake in the novel: both that of the child but also that of the adult narrator, who has become a father, and who can judge, years later, his acts as a child.⁵
- 7 However, *The Fishermen* drifts away from this teleological and linear grid in favour of a circular pattern, the most striking demonstration of which might lie in the fact that the same words are used at the beginning of the novel and near the very end ("We were fishermen: my brothers and I became fishermen," [9], "We were fishermen. My brothers and I became -," [301]).⁶ A poetics of circularity seems to be one of the founding principles at the core of *The Fishermen*. The following hypothesis can therefore be posed: that the novel relies heavily on a revolution in the Copernican sense.⁷ The rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* offered by Obioma questions teleology and linearity and promotes circularity. The latter seems to be a common feature in many postcolonial Nigerian *Bildungsromane*.
- 8 The environment that is described in *The Fishermen* is one of disillusionment (which is representative of some third -generation Nigerian novels). It goes against what some writers advocate (including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2009 Ted Talk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story") when they argue that it is time to put an end to Afro-pessimism. Third-generation disillusionment might be seen as an echo to the post-colonial disillusionment that was central among earlier generations of Nigerian writers, in the 1960s, for instance.⁸ In "The Postcolonial African *Bildungsroman*: Extending the Paradigm," Ogaga Okuyade traces a direct line between the former generations and the third generation of Nigerian writers, and writes that "only the political atmosphere differs; the temper remains the same" (2009, 72). Despite the assumption according to which the *Bildungsroman* is "an essentially optimistic genre" (Felski 1989, 122), some periods have nonetheless given birth to a rather pessimistic form of *Bildungsroman*, as exemplified by the modernist late nineteenth, early twentieth

-century British and German *Bildungsroman*, in which satisfactory adult collective life, which implies integration into the larger social order, is particularly arduous: the model of the pessimistic *Bildungsroman* seems more coherent with a post-independence atmosphere as it is described in *The Fishermen*. The socio-political atmosphere put forth in the novel can even result in some form of "arrested development" for the protagonist as explained by Jed Esty (2012, 22),⁹ or in a "suspended state," as shown by Sarah K. Harrison (2012, 95, 98).

- 9 The "arrested development" at issue in the novel is partly linked to the conditions in which the main character grows up. As is explained by the narrator in the incipit, he became a fisherman "in January of 1996" (Obioma 2015, 9), therefore right in the middle of Sani Abacha's term in office. When the narrator/protagonist writes "I realize that it was during one of these trips to the river that our lives and our world changed" (20), it points out the conjoined development of the *Bildungen* of the individual and the nation and it indicates that, in this novel, the individual's development can be read as an allegory of the nation's development.

Allegorizing the *Bildungsroman*: Nigeria's June 12 "Revolution"

- 10 Ogaga Okuyade writes that "the personal experiences of the protagonists serve as an index to the larger cultural, socio-historical conditions and thus the protagonists' personal *Bildung* becomes inseparable from the political agenda of their nations" (2009, 7). Moreover, in his unfinished essay on the *Bildungsroman*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the genre presents "the image of man in the process of becoming." It classically puts forth "human emergence [with an] assimilation of real historical time" (1986, 21). A strong link between individual emergence and historical emergence is therefore perceived as a characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* (Bakhtin 1986, 23). The individual's development often parallels the nation's in an allegorical way.¹⁰ The allegory having a satirical and propagandist function, it is a powerful instrument for political criticism. To use Bakhtin's words, the hero

emerges with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. [The hero] is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. (23–24)

In *The Fishermen*, the "border between two epochs" is embodied by June 12, 1993, the date when a transition between military dictatorship and democracy almost took place.

- 11 The use of the *Bildungsroman* genre makes sense in Obioma's project which focuses on the idea of a "revolution". As has already been stated, according to Elze, the prevalence of the *Bildungsroman* genre in the nineteenth century is related to "revolutionary politics" (2017, 38). The critic adds:

To understand the proliferation of the picaresque in the postcolony and its emphasis on subversion and complicity, we need to first understand the relation between both the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque, and the social climates they repeatedly emplot. Subversion is certainly not the better or more radical political strategy against which the conservative *Bildungsroman* somehow falls short. Quite the opposite: the *Bildungsroman* is, in its most radical form "as the full assimilations

of historical time," suited like no other genre for the articulation of struggle, transformation, and revolution. (36)

Obioma, and this is the case for most *Bildungsromane* writers of his generation, sketches the portrait of a Nigeria that is deteriorating;¹¹ thus, for the hero and his surroundings, development cannot be linear. On the contrary, *Bildung* is strewn with hurdles – real or metaphorical – for the men and women who live in that society. According to Apollo Amoko, there are similarities between the context of urgency during which the *Bildungsroman* emerged in Europe, and that of a "revolution" in which the *Bildungsroman* has become popular in the Republic of Nigeria. In the European context, Amoko speaks of a "radical transformation and social upheaval" (2009, 200).¹² I would argue that the *Bildungsroman* as it is used by Obioma is central to displaying the crisis of post-independence in 1990s Nigeria for indeed, "the narrative of *Bildung* clearly has enormous potential for all forms of political struggle" (Elze 2017, 42).¹³

- 12 *The Fishermen* mixes historical facts and fiction, almost offering a form of *faction*, and it is deeply anchored in the history of the nation as exemplified by the numerous references, among others, to M.K.O. Abiola who ran for the presidency in 1993. The nineties and 1993 in particular were a very troubled and unstable period in Nigeria. The citizens hoped for a transition from military dictatorship to democracy, a transition which failed. Although M.K.O. Abiola was democratically elected, the results were annulled by General Ibrahim Babangida, and General Sani Abacha seized power later that year. Benjamin, the narrator, explains: "Then we knew we were safe and had escaped the 1993 election uprising in which more than a hundred people were killed in Akure. June the 12th became a *seminal day in the history of Nigeria*" (Obioma 2015, 127, emphasis added). In this short extract, the fate of the hero is intrinsically linked to the fate of the nation. A seven -page passage toward the middle of the novel sheds light on the 1993 riot in which the brothers' lives are clearly jeopardized, with yet another sentence that weaves individual and national fates: "Outside, it was as if the world had been sawn in two and we were all teetering on the edge of the chasm" (123).
- 13 The afore-mentioned transition point between two epochs is inscribed geographically in the text through the "Omi-Ala River." Depending on the tones used in the tone language of Yoruba, tones which are transcribed by written signs, the meaning of the name of the river ("Omi-Ala") changes in a radical way. Obioma does not favour any tone and neutralizes the words thus allowing a deeper possibility of interpretation. "Omi" means water while "Ala" with the following tones – "Àlà" – means dream, which in the context of the novel fully makes sense since the madman's prophecies can be perceived as such. However, "Àlà" can mean threshold, margin, limit, boundary, landmark, confine, precinct, line of demarcation. Therefore, this river carries in its name the very concept of transition. It is a limit, a geographical boundary, a body of water that separates.
- 14 *The Fishermen* first focuses on borders as cartographic limits imposed by (colonial) power. The river physically splits the town in two as can be seen on the map at the beginning of the book: by definition, and because of its liquid quality, this type of border cannot be seen as fixed, but as fluid and shape-shifting. As argued by Johan Schimanski, "borders are constantly under reaffirmation and negotiation: they are not final givens" (2015, 94). This is clear when applied to the "Omi-Ala River" as explained by the narrator himself: towards the end of the novel, after he has spent six years in jail for the murder of Abulu, the narrator is driven back home, crosses the river by car, and sees people fishing there (unlike what he used to see when he was a child). The nature

of the river and the beliefs associated to it seem to have changed. The river as physical border becomes symbolic border. In *The Fishermen*, "Omi-Ala" embodies a prohibited space: since British missionaries made locals suspicious about all the beliefs associated with the river, the latter has been considered ominous. It is explained in the following passage, taken from the chapter entitled "The River":

Omi-Ala was a dreadful river. Long forsaken by the inhabitants of Akure town like a mother abandoned by her children. But it was once a pure river that supplied the earliest settlers with fish and clean drinking water. It surrounded Akure and snaked through its length and breadth. Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name, and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja, Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies. This changed when the colonialists came from Europe, and introduced the Bible, which then prized Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place. A cradle besmeared. (21)

- 15 *The Fishermen* can be read as a parable of the (negative) impact of colonialism. In this case, Yoruba or Igbo practices were perceived as heathen.¹⁴ Everything that comes from this river seems to be a source of terror. As it is a prohibited in-between "Third Space," a space that engenders new possibilities, an ambivalent site with no "primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 1994, 37), the "Omi-Ala River" becomes an object of fascination for the brothers who long to become fishermen despite the inhabitants' alarmed warnings as regards its hazardousness: "It became the source of dark rumours. One such rumour was that people committed all sorts of fetish rituals at its banks" (Obioma 2015, 21). In this novel, borders – whether they be physical, symbolic, or epistemological – are thus bound to be crossed, in the same way as it would be beneficial for Nigeria to effect the transition from military rule to democracy: the novels points to this interpretation.
- 16 The connection between Nigerian history and literature is felt strongly in many post-colonial novels, sometimes giving the impression that they are mere re-articulations of the historical events described.¹⁵ However, *The Fishermen* should not be read as a mere historical account of post-independence- Nigeria as such a reading would ignore what Jane Bryce depicts as "powerfully evocative and convincing fictional dramas of individual characters set against realist renderings of a particular time and place" (2008, 54) when it comes to third -generation Nigerian novels.¹⁶ It is therefore important to highlight the importance of poetics in the context of *The Fishermen*, which heavily deals with history. Some readers could consider that the novel lacks literary value by sticking to facts.¹⁷ In this sense, Obioma can be said to display a major interest in Nigerian history also emphasized by other third-generation fiction writers.¹⁸
- 17 *The Fishermen* emphasizes the African postcolonial condition which leads to an irregular development for the main character. The social and political conditions of postcolonial Nigeria represent a real menace to the *Bidungsprozess*, namely through (generic) excess.

When "revolution" leads to excess and (generic) instability: madness in the postcolony

- 18 In *The Fishermen*, a series of catastrophes befalls the family and the whole country:
Father was bitter. He bemoaned the poor health facilities in the country. He swore at Abacha, the dictator, and railed on about the marginalization of Igbos in Nigeria.

Then he complained about the monster the British had created by forming Nigeria as a whole [...]. (Obioma 2015, 34)

The protagonist's father describes a monstrous geopolitical creation, i.e. something exceeding norms, unnatural, that was born during colonisation.¹⁹ The character considered as responsible for the tragedy the family is going through is Abulu, the "madman," who is paradoxically both a marginal and a central character: he is the ultimate transgressor whose prophecy precipitates the family's destruction. Excess as personified by Abulu petrifies the children and their development/*Bildung*. The madman allegorically embodies the state of the nation since he himself is a monstrous figure in many ways. He is excessive, as indicated by the narrator:

I observed that he carried on his body a variety of odours, the most noticeable of which was a faecal smell that wafted at me like a drone of flies when I drew closer to him. [...] He reeked of sweat accumulated inside the dense growth of hair around his pubic regions and armpits. He smelt of rotten food, and unhealed wounds and pus, and of bodily fluids and wastes. He was redolent of rusting metals, putrefying matter, old clothes, ditched underwear he sometimes wore. He smelt, too, of leaves, creepers, decaying mangoes by the Omi-Ala, the sand of the riverbanks, and even of the water itself. [...] But these were not all; he smelt of immaterial things. (229–30)

The focus on bad smells with words such as "wafted," "reeked," "redolent," "odours," and the polyptoton "smell/smelt," echo the emphasis laid on bodily fluids of all kinds, whether it be pus, sweat, urine, or faeces. At the beginning of the novel, another marginalized character, a "madwoman," literally "shat" "at the very centre of the market" (25). This stress on shit is reminiscent of what Joshua D. Esty describes as "excremental postcolonialism." In Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, one of the main characters says that "Next to death, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country" (1972, 108). Soyinka, and Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, used this grotesque vision and shit (as well as vomit, piss, sweat, phlegm) as "an index of moral and political outrage," as "political satire" (Esty 199, 22). It is interesting to note that Obioma follows the tradition in which texts are locating themselves "in the context of failed or flawed postcolonial nationalism" (Esty 1999, 24).

- 19 While Benjamin – still as a child – is jailed for the murder of Abulu (yet another benchmark of the failure of the individual and of the nation), his father sends him a letter, with one passage to which the reader has access: "Young men are killed on rutted and dilapidated 'death traps' called roads every day. Yet, these idiots at Aso Rock claim this country will survive. There lies the issue, their lies is the issue" (Obioma 2015, 296, original emphasis).²⁰ In the post-independence contexts, the

shaping power of [the *Bildungsroman*] was soon considered to have been exhausted. The reign of autocratic political leaders in many countries [...] certainly weakened many authors' optimistic perspectives regarding positive and stable postcolonial futures, and questioned the idea of progression inherent in the temporalities of the *Bildungsroman*. A focus on abjection [...] that critiques the excesses of the postcolonial state is emblematic of the fictions of this era, which, consequently, are also marked by a sustained shift in genre preference towards satire, the grotesque, and also the picaresque. (Elze 2017, 42)

- 20 Scatology can be a symptom of the nation's failed development and in this context Abulu becomes a potent symbol of scatological satire. Another passage is interesting as regards this character's position in society: he is described as "a mediator between two domains, an intermediary between a dream world and our world," "a prophet, a scarecrow, a deity" (Obioma 2015, 100). This points to what Michel Foucault describes in his seminal book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* in

which he writes that during the Renaissance, mad people were abandoned at the gates of the city and were therefore confined to the threshold as their natural location. Banishment was what awaited mad people in medieval society. Foucault speaks of "the madman's *liminal* position" (1988, 11, original emphasis). The mad inhabitants at the border of society became conspicuous as beings carrying a message from another world. Closer to the context of the text itself, since it takes place in Yorubaland, Abulu also seems to embody Eshu, the Yoruba Orisha, who is known for being the messenger of all Orishas.²¹ Eshu inhabits crossroads and is in charge of relations between God and Man. He is well-known for being a gatekeeper, and for having a voracious appetite (including sexual appetite, similar to Abulu's).

- 21 Only through the cathartic death of the mad "prophet," perhaps reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion, do the brothers deem it possible to live as before. The following passage describes how Benjamin and one of his brothers kill Abulu:

The djinn that seemed to suddenly possess us that moment leapt to the fore of my mind and tore every bit of my sense to shreds. We jabbed the hook of our lines blindly at his chest, his face, his hand, his head, his neck and everywhere we could, crying and weeping. The madman was frantic, mad, dazed. He flung his arms aloft to shield himself, running backwards, shouting and screaming. The blows perforated his flesh, boring bleeding holes and ripping out chunks of his flesh every time we pulled out the hooks. [...] The madman jabbered about, his voice deafening, his body in flustered panic. We kept hitting, pulling, striking, screaming, crying, and sobbing until weakened, covered in blood, and wailing like a child, Abulu fell backwards into the water in a wild splash. (Obioma 2015, 255)

- 22 A rhetoric of excess is clearly at stake here namely through the use of the paratactic rhythm. The accumulation of adjectives, as well as [ING] forms, particularly toward the end of this passage, seems to reinforce the violence used by the two brothers in order to assassinate Abulu. Moreover, the man is literally transformed into fragments, as shown by the references to body parts, and particularly to "chunks of his flesh" being "ripped out" by the hooks used in order to kill him. The odd reference to the "djinn," a Muslim spirit, attests to the changing world of the two Christian brothers who are losing their cultural landmarks. Madness seems to affect the two brothers as well as the novel itself, hence leading to a destabilisation of generic boundaries. *The Fishermen* is a *Bildungsroman*, but has equally been called an "Igbo tragedy" by Obioma himself, pointing to a hybrid genre. In an interview with *Premium Times*, he declares: "I call [*The Fishermen*] an Igbo tragedy because it is a different kind of tragedy. It is not working in the same way the Shakespearean or Grecian tragedy works. It is our own kind of tragedy – my own form of tragedy."²² Several occurrences of the words "tragic" and "tragedy" appear in the novel and one of the brothers, Obembe, says: "We must kill Abulu or else we cannot have peace [...]. There's a wound he has inflicted on us that would never ever heal. If we do not kill this madman, nothing will ever be the same" (Obioma 2015, 206). In this context, the killing of Abulu is reminiscent of the sacrifice of a scapegoat who comes to represent a crisis through its ambivalent position within a social order and is subsequently sacrificed so that stability might thereby be achieved.²³ *The Fishermen* can also be considered as a "liminal novel" as defined by Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa in her book in which she explains that

the liminal novel is a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage [...] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel the protagonist is still in the middle of the quest, either still moving towards what supposedly

constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance. (1996, 3)

- 23 *The Fishermen* abandons its protagonist at the threshold between youth and the beginning of maturity, not making it clear how the next stage will be fulfilled.
- 24 While *The Fishermen* deals with political violence, bravery, injustice, but also political instability, Obioma shows that hope lies on the shoulders of Nigerian youths as shown in the last chapter of the book which mainly focuses on the protagonist's two younger siblings, David, and maybe above all, Nkem who, when Benjamin is driven back home from jail, opens the gate of the compound, making it possible for him to "start [...] all over again," (Obioma 2015, 301) which are the last words of the novel. Although it can be argued that this emphasis on youth shows that society is turned toward the future rather than toward the past, the *Bildungsprozess* of the protagonist has failed, if one follows what Franco Moretti describes: "[In the classical *Bildungsroman*] it is [...] indispensable for time to stop at a privileged moment. A *Bildung* is truly such only if, at a certain point, it can be seen as *concluded*" (1987, 26, original emphasis). *The Fishermen* is open-ended as is the case in many other third-generation Nigerian novels, which indicates that the *Bildungsprozess* has somewhat failed. Indeed, numerous critics consider that the *Bildungsroman* presents a form of closure, often through the marriage of the protagonist for instance. Yet, this is not the scenario offered by Obioma in *The Fishermen*.
- 25 Obioma's novel employs a revolutionary poetics in that it lays the emphasis on a revolution in the Copernican sense when it comes to the *Bildung* of its protagonist. Like a number of "Third World" texts (to use the now infamous Jamesonian category), the development of the individual can be perceived as an index of the (failed) development of the nation at a time when Nigeria was ruled by the military. This socio-political environment leads to madness, as embodied in an allegorical way by Abulu; it is however a madness that also affects the protagonist and his family, leading to the murder of the mad "prophet," which finally sends Benjamin, still a child at the time, to jail. This novel of post-independence disillusion nonetheless ends on a more positive outcome, with David and Nkem, who embody the future of Nigeria: they are seen as "signs or harbingers of good times" (Obioma 2015, 298).

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NOTES

1. The novel lays emphasis on the loss of authority of the father, which corresponds to what Apollo Amoko describes in "Autobiography and *Bildungsroman* in African Literature": "[w]ith its focus on youth, the African *Bildungsroman* illustrates how, in the wake of colonialism, the father's authority is irreversibly undermined" (2009, 200). Like the African *Bildungsroman* mentioned by Amoko, *The Fishermen* is clearly centered on youth.
2. It is interesting to notice that Morgenstern speaks about a "certain stage of completeness," therefore putting the stress on a wide spectrum of possible *Bildungen*. Moreover, in "The *Bildungsroman* in Nineteenth-Century English Literature," G.B. Tennyson depicts the *Bildung* of the child in a "direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty" (1968, 137).
3. I am deliberately borrowing Bernhard F. Malkmus's idea in *The German Pícaro and Modernity: Between Underdog and Shape-Shifter*, in which he refers to the "revolutionary politics" as an "environment that fostered the emergence of a different kind of initiation story that pitched a human individual in new ways against society – the *Bildungsroman*" (2014, 34). This idea is also

picked up by Jens Elze in *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity* when he writes about the "‘revolutionary politics,’ pointing towards the transformative potential of the *Bildungsroman* and its capacity to mobilize political action" (2017, 38). However, as explained by Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, there are "various kinds of *Bildungsroman*" which can be grouped according to two principles: "the ‘classification’ principle and the ‘transformation’ principle" (1987, 7). According to the description of these two principles given by Moretti, *The Fishermen* can be said to lean toward "the ‘transformation’ principle" namely because the novel is "open-ended." Yet, it can also be argued that some elements focus on "the ‘classification’" of the hero. This is often the case as, once again according to Moretti, "both are always present in a narrative work" (1987, 7).

4. Many a critic argues that even Goethe's novel does not meet the generic expectations of the *Bildungsroman*. Gregory Castle refers to the genre as a "phantom formation" for instance.

5. In "Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial *Bildungsroman*," José Santiago Fernández Vázquez explains that "[t]his retrospective view [characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*], usually charged with irony towards the younger self, highlights the success of the *Bildung* process. In order for this success to be perceived by the reader, the novel must indicate clearly that the protagonist is now a better person than he was" (2002, 86).

6. One could argue that the differences in the punctuation as well as the missing word ("fishermen") at the end of the novel shows an incomplete circular movement.

7. In Fernández Vázquez' article, which deals with Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, a very different novel (in terms of the atmosphere described) from the one studied in this article, the critic mentions a rupture of the teleological sequence of events by saying that the protagonist's story puts forth a "circular, episodic, loop-like narrative technique [...] which some critics would consider an attribute of the modern third-world novel" (2002, 98). Because *The Fishermen* does not use an *abiku* as protagonist, the circularity is by definition far less present than in *The Famished Road*; yet, it is still quite central in the narrated (historical) events. The teleological structure of the traditional *Bildungsroman* goes hand in hand with the concepts of history and progress. Therefore, by interrupting this teleological structure, Obioma insists on the constant return to dictatorship in Nigeria, emphasizes this circularity, and seems to regret the missed opportunity at a transition from military rule to democracy, in 1993.

8. According to Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, members of the first two generations of Nigerian writers "were mostly born during the first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force. Their textualities were [...] massively overdetermined by that experience" (2005, 14). The writers who belong to the second generation (Femi Osofisan, Ben Okri, Ochia Ofeimun, or Buchi Emecheta, among others) did not really know "the colonial event": yet, "their formative years were shaped by independence and its aftermath of *disillusionment* and *stasis*" (2005, 14, emphasis added).

9. Jed Esty's study on the modernist *Bildungsroman* puts to the fore a *Bildungsroman* of arrested development and, according to Elze, "[r]ather than assuming the full-scale abolishment of notions of *Bildung*, self-formation, and understanding, usually associated with modernism [...] Esty focusses on the transformation of the idea of *Bildung* in late nineteenth-century Anglophone literatures that resulted in '*Metabildungsromane*' of stunted growth or arrested development" (2012, 39).

10. In *The Fishermen*, the daily struggles of the characters cannot be separated from the broader political situation. Fredric Jameson's assertion that "Third World" literatures should be read as national allegories holds true in *The Fishermen* (1986).

11. The deterioration of the country as described by Obioma is reminiscent of the one denounced by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) candidate in the 1993 elections, to wit M.K.O. Abiola. This is

particularly striking in the SDP campaign video which portrays Abiola as the only person who embodies hope for the Nigerians (see the bibliography).

12. Amoko goes back to the reasons explaining the emergence of youth in literature in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and explains that "in periods of radical transformation and social upheaval, youth takes center stage, supplanting adulthood. The 18th and 19th centuries were a period of radical social transformation in Europe" (2009, 200).

13. Elze asserts: "Aside from its propensity to articulate historical change, the *Bildungsroman* is also more adaptable to the climates of insecurity than has often been admitted. In fact, it may even be said to have thrived on these climates" (39).

14. This could remind the reader of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, in which colonialists convinced the local populations that their practices (namely religious ones) were not acceptable.

15. Some of the most striking examples of this inter-connectedness between literature and history among third-generation writers are Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, or Chris Abani's *GraceLand*. As far as Obioma's novel is concerned, it puts forth the hope the 1993 free elections represented in the country. *The Fishermen* is also different from Habila and Abani's works in that it focuses far less on the poverty and persecution the hero might suffer from in the hands of the military. The novel does focus on poverty through the character of Abulu for instance, but as regards the protagonist himself, who grows up in a well-to-do family, Obioma's novel is thematically more akin to Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is also interesting to notice that despite being born later than Abani, Adichie or Atta, Obioma (born in 1986) continues to dwell on the centrality of history in his fiction.

16. In the same article, Jane Bryce emphasizes one of the thematic concerns of third-generation novelists, to whom Chigozie Obioma can be said to belong, when she writes that "there is no doubt that underlying [third-generation] novels is a protest against what Nigeria has become" (2008, 58).

17. *The Fishermen* can be said to be uneven in parts, especially in terms of development and sometimes as regards voice. The novel describes living conditions in Nigeria in 1993 under Sani Abacha's dictatorship (1993-1998), by including them in the novel itself, running the risk of emphasizing social and historical aspects rather than the aesthetic value of the novel.

18. Jane Bryce demonstrates that third-generation Nigerian "novels embody the effects of forty years of failed democratic rule and military dictatorship, corruption, state violence, and war on those who were either children or unborn at the time of the events which would set Nigeria on its postcolonial path" (2008, 54).

19. What is now referred to as the "National Question" in Nigeria arose from the diversity of ethnic groups present in the country (about 250), making Nigerian society a fragmented one.

20. Chigozie Obioma follows the previous generations of writers as represented by Soyinka, Achebe or even Osofisan. According to the latter, literature has to tackle socio-political problems, among which "the abuse of power, widespread poverty and squalor, kleptomania and corruption in the public life, the suffering of the common people, and so on" (Osofisan 2007, 4). In this sense, many of the third-generation writers can be said to have a socio-critical vision of literature.

21. Orishas are mainly Yoruba deities, but they are also worshipped by other ethnic groups in West Africa and in South America (as a result of the Atlantic slave trade).

22. Moreover, in his *Guardian* review, Habila writes that "The Fishermen is also grounded in the Aristotelian concept of tragedy" (2015).

23. For further details about the figure of the scapegoat, see René Girard's seminal work, *Le bouc émissaire* (1982).

ABSTRACTS

Nigerian writer Chigozie Obioma's debut novel is a *Bildungsroman* set in Nigeria in the 1990s. It focuses on the coming-of-age of Benjamin, the narrator and protagonist, whose *Bildung* clearly parallels, in an allegorical way, the nation's. Overall, history looms large in this novel which follows the tradition launched by earlier Nigerian writers. The *Bildungsroman* genre seems to be effective to put forth the "revolutionary politics" and poetics at the heart of Obioma's project.

INDEX

Keywords: Obioma (Chigozie), revolution, history, Bildungsroman, allegory, madness

AUTHOR

CÉDRIC COURTOIS

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Cédric Courtois teaches English at the University of Panthéon-Sorbonne. His PhD dissertation (2019) is entitled "Itineraries of a Genre. Variations on the *Bildungsroman* in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction" and he has published several articles and book chapters on this topic. His research interests include postcolonial literatures, refugee literature, decoloniality, transnationalism, transculturalism, ecopoetics, gender studies, mobility studies, and the ethics and aesthetics of violence in African literatures written in English.